

Intergenerational Relationships: Case Study of Stephen Fry and Elliott Spencer



Victoria Bengel is a MSc Gender (Research) student at the Gender Institute. Her main areas of interest are sexuality, masculinity and gender performativity. For her MSc dissertation she will be focusing on Drag Kings in the London gay scene, especially in lesbian spaces and their association with sexuality and gender.

Actor and presenter Stephen Fry and comedian Elliott Spencer **announced their engagement** on 6 January, 2015 amidst a flood of media interest. As I followed the coverage, I was struck by the media's constant reiteration of the couple's age difference. Rather than celebrating their engagement and later marriage, I was appalled to see how the British media demonised the couple due to their 30-year age gap. The mainstream British media focused on the way in which homosexuality, but more specifically intergenerational same-sex couples are devalued compared to heterosexual couples. Despite the amount of coverage and the apparent praising of the couple, the underlying tones of much media attention reinforced the concept that adult, intergenerational[1] relationships are 'unnatural' and 'wrong'. This article looks at the ways in which intergenerational relationships between gay men are represented through discourses on economics, age, and homonormativity.

The case study of Stephen Fry and his recent marriage to Elliott Spencer on the 17th January, 2015, highlights the ways in which intergenerational relationships are portrayed as 'unnatural' through the mainstream media. Rubin argues, that "the lowest of all on the hierarchical system of sexual value are those whose eroticism transgresses generational boundaries"[2]. In the coverage of Stephen Fry and Elliott Spencer's relationship, the mainstream British media continuously used an economic framework to represent their relationship. Intergenerational relationships are depicted as the older partner being financially well off and the younger partner desiring or needing financial assistance. This highlights the presumption that the older male has to 'keep' his young partner through material objects because the younger partner is sexually desirable and physically attractive.

This can be seen through the case study of Stephen Fry and Elliott Spencer where the *Mirror* had the following headline: "Stephen Fry's fiancé Elliott Spencer living the high life as he tweets customised champagne gift: 'Mr. & Mr.'". The language in this title emphasizes the economic aspect of the couple's relationship. The concept of 'high life' implies extravagance and a life that would not be possible without Fry's financial prosperity. Fry is represented as spoiling his attractive fiancé in order to keep him invested and interested in their relationship. The article refers to Spencer as a 'toyboy', which again has negative connotations of a younger partner using his sex appeal for economic benefits from his older partner. In *Hello! Magazine*, the title was "Stephen Fry and Elliott Spencer kick off three month honeymoon", describing their 'exotic' honeymoon in "Cuba and three or four other countries". The media portrays an imbalance of power, placing the power in the hands of the younger partner as he is portrayed as exploiting the older partner economically.


Aging is often seen as negative in Western society[3], portrayed as a loss of power and weakening of the individual. Old age is seen as a disease with symptoms such as sagging, wrinkling, and greying "which are symbols of lack of control"[4]. Due to Fry's age, he is depicted in this light, as hopeless, fearful of isolation and in need of 'saving', portraying him as 'weak.' Fry has suffered from depression and bipolar disorder and attempted to commit suicide twice according the *Guardian*, and Spencer has given him a new sense of life, bringing a 'smile' back to Fry. This portrays Fry as emasculated and having little to no power in his older age, requiring help from a youthful consort to return to life. This can be understood through the intergenerational relationship

lens that older gay men are only permitted to be sexual beings without shame if a younger male initiates the sexual interest. Otherwise, the older man is seen as a sexual predator, who is unwelcome. This depiction that the older partner yearns for love whilst the younger is portrayed as exploiting wealth, being somewhat innocent yet reckless. Elliott Spencer is represented as uncontrollable and young through the article in the *Independent* with the headline, “Elliott Spencer crashes Stephen Fry’s Bentley fleeing reporters outside the actors’ home”. This reiterates the idea that because Spencer is young, he is irresponsible and needs to be controlled. Again this is represented in the *Telegraph* article with the headline, “Stephen Fry’s fiancé Elliott Spencer banned from driving for speeding at 101 mph”. This suggests that Spencer is young and out of control and reiterates social discourses on age and sexuality.

Another dimension informing the media discourse around Spencer and Fry’s relationship is how relationships between a young individual and an older individual are portrayed through the frame of incest. There is therefore a fear of cross-generational relationships due to Westernised societies seeing incest as a taboo. Due to the incest taboo intergenerational relationships cannot be seen as containing love. This representation of intergenerational relationships as incestuous can be seen in the *Mail Online* article about the couple in the following sentence, “Mr. Spencer’s father Robert, who at 57 is the same age as his new son-in-law”. This link between Fry’s age and his father-in-law’s age alludes to the fact that Fry could be Spencer’s father and that this crosses the boundary of acceptable sexualities. In Western societies, there is a disapproval for desiring a ‘daddy’, seen through the prism of the incest taboo, which leads to media demonising intergenerational relationships.

Fry and Spencer have been represented in the media as adopting traditional heterosexual norms, including marriage and the desire to have children. This plays into the concept of homonormativity whereby LGBT individuals gain acceptance by mimicking the heterosexual ideal. On the 17 January, 2015 the *Guardian* announced that Fry and Spencer had taken their vows. Marriage can be understood as a heterosexual institution, which in the UK has been extended to same-sex relationships. However, this can be seen as same sex couples imitating the heterosexual ideal. Eleven days after the ceremony there was an announcement in the British media that Fry and Spencer are planning on having children, “‘I want the patter of tiny feet’: Stephen Fry reveals that he would like to start a family with Elliott Spencer” was the headline of the *Mail Online*. Again this is reinforcing this idea of homonormativity, for a same sex couple to be seen as acceptable they must embrace and participate in heterosexual institutions.

Moreover, participation in consumer culture has been identified as one way that LGBT individuals gain acceptance as ‘valuable citizens’ with discourses about sexuality in Western contexts. Linking to this idea is constant reference and portrayal of Fry and Spencer engaging in consumer culture, with frequent mention of the holidays they are going on. In the *Mirror*, it stated that the couple had been on trips to New York and Europe. Also there are consistent indications to luxurious cars, the Bentley which I mentioned earlier, and also when Spencer was caught driving at 101 mph it was in a loaned Aston Martin worth £130,000, according to the *Guardian*. The ways the media have portrayed the couple is not as deviant and not the ‘norm’ but as more ‘normal’/‘acceptable’/ ‘not so different’ by displaying how they partake in heteronormative ideals and consumer culture. This is evident in the Fry and Spencer case, however; they can only achieve this positive representation to an extent because of their age difference.

Heteronormativity and norms of gender, age and economic relationships exempt compliant subjects from the pressure to justify their relationships, identities and sexualities; however, because society deems Fry and Spencer’s relationship as deviant there is a need for them to defend it or for the media to employ strategizing that emphasize their ‘not-so-differentness’ from heteronormative, age and class matched ideals. Therefore, underlying the fact that Spencer and Fry do not see their age difference as the defining point of their relationship, which can be seen through Spencer *speaking out* about the disapproval of their 30-year age gap, stating, “I don’t care what people think. Stephen is the love of my life, the light of my life”. However, the British mainstream media choose to constantly focus on the age difference as the defining aspect of the relationship. Despite the continuous focus on the couple in the mainstream British media,  there is

little praise for the couple on their engagement and subsequent marriage. Instead the media choose to fixate on their age gap and homonormative aspects of their relationship. On the one hand, the media focus on these characteristics to highlight that same-sex couples are 'respectable', on the other hand though, as soon as there is a deviation from the imagined gay 'norm', the couple is demonised. This can be seen in the Fry and Spencer case where they are seen as sexually 'deviant' due to their intergenerational relationship and depicted as 'less than', 'normal' same-sex couples and heterosexual couples.

[1] Generation in this context refers to not just age but to social experiences which mark one group from another, for example, the AIDS epidemic or the Beatles era (Ken Plummer, "Generational Sexualities, Subterranean Traditions, and the Hauntings of the Sexual World: Some Preliminary Remarks", *Symbolic Interaction* 33:2, (2010), 172.)

[2] Gayle S. Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality" in *Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove et al. (New York: Routledge, 1993), 11-12.

[3] Christopher Hajek and Howard Giles, "The Old Man Out: An Intergroup Analysis of Intergenerational Communication Among Gay Men", *Journal of Communication* 52:4 (2006), 699.

[4] Julie Jones and Steve Pugh, "Ageing gay men: Lessons from the sociology of embodiment", *Men and Masculinities* 7:3 (2005), 254.

May 5th, 2015 | [Arts & Culture](#), [Society](#) | [1 Comment](#)

☺

